

Scoping proposal

National Forests in Florida Revised Land and Resource Management Plan Amendment to reassign Management Areas on the Ocala National Forest (Amendment 12)

**USDA Forest Service
National Forests in Florida
Lake, Marion, and Putnam Counties**

The Forest Service is proposing to 1) reassign about 50,000 acres of scrub habitat from Management Area 8.2 (Sand Pine, Mixed Regeneration, Moderate Openings) to Management Area 8.4 (Scrub-Jay Management Area) and 2) revise the Desired Future Condition of Management Area 8.4.

Changing the designation of Management Areas (MAs) and the revision of a Desired Future Condition (DFC) require an amendment to the Forest Plan. The Forest Supervisor, Kelly Russell, is the Responsible Official for this process and will decide whether to approve the proposed changes, to approve alternative changes, or to take no action.

Need for action

The Florida Scrub-Jay (*Aphelocoma coerulescens*) is the only bird species endemic to Florida and its distribution is limited to early successional scrub habitats across the state. The Florida Scrub-Jay was listed as a Threatened species by the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service in 1987 due to significant population declines resulting from habitat degradation due to fire suppression, habitat loss from development and agriculture, and the resulting habitat fragmentation. A recent study found further declines in Florida Scrub-Jay populations across the state from 1993 to 2011.

The Ocala National Forest (ONF) has approximately 226,000 acres of scrub habitat within its boundaries, with roughly 202,000 acres of this unique habitat occurring in one contiguous block – by far the largest unbroken expanse of scrub habitat in the world. Therefore, the ONF is essential for long-term persistence and recovery of the Florida Scrub-Jay. With scrub habitat continuing to disappear and degrade across the state and Scrub-Jay populations continuing to decline in the remaining isolated pieces of scrub, the Ocala National Forest is the most significant remaining piece of potential habitat for the Florida Scrub-Jay.

The 1999 Land and Resource Management Plan for the National Forests in Florida (the “Forest Plan”) and relevant Forest Plan Amendments established two main MAs in scrub habitat on the ONF: Management Area 8.2 and Management Area 8.4. The goal of Management Area 8.2 is “to produce pulpwood under conditions that balance efficient timber production practices with

practices that promote the growth and perpetuation of species native to the Big Scrub area within the Ocala NF”. The goal of Management Area 8.4 is “to provide conditions favorable to perpetuate Florida Scrub-Jay and other species that require young oak scrub”. Currently, approximately 94% (around 191,000 acres) of the ONF’s 226,000 total acreage of scrub habitat is under Management Area 8.2, while only 1.3% (2,870 acres) of this total is being managed for Scrub-Jays under Management Area 8.4. As stated above, the initial direction for MA 8.2 was to balance pulpwood production with providing habitat for scrub species. However, the method of regenerating habitat within MA 8.2 may not be producing scrub habitat of a high enough quality or quantity to maintain a stable, viable Florida Scrub-Jay population in the long-term. Habitat within MA 8.2 is often seeded with sand pine after harvest to ensure a viable stand of pulpwood in the future, but sand pine in high densities can produce habitat conditions unfavorable to Scrub-Jays. Sand pines can quickly outcompete the scrub oaks that are important to Scrub-Jays for food and nesting sources. The amount of open, bare ground is also minimized in seeded stands, which normally provides areas for caching acorns and observing ground predators.

In response to the declining population status of the Florida Scrub-Jay and the continued habitat loss and degradation across Florida, the Forest Service is proposing to increase the amount of scrub habitat that is managed for the Florida Scrub-Jay and other endemic scrub species on the Ocala National Forest by re-designating about 50,000 acres from Management Area 8.2 to Management Area 8.4. The change in Management Area designation would occur directly as a result of this Amendment, but the implementation of the described practices would occur over the next 20 to 30 years as sand pine stands are harvested to initiate the early successional oak scrub habitat. Rotational sand pine harvest would continue as usual in the remaining acres of MA 8.2. The end result of this change in management direction would be a scrub landscape with increased high quality scrub habitat to ensure the long-term persistence of Florida Scrub-Jays and other endemic scrub species.

Relationship to the Forest Plan

The purpose of this amendment is to contribute towards the Forestwide Goal of “managing for habitat conditions to recover and sustain viable populations of all native species, with a special emphasis on rare species” (Forest Plan Goal #9, p. 2.4) by providing a level of management on the ONF landscape that is commensurate with the importance of the landscape to the ultimate survival and persistence of endangered scrub species, including the Florida Scrub-Jay.

If re-designation occurs, the new 8.4 Management Areas would be managed as described in the 1999 Land and Resource Management Plan and all applicable Amendments. All future management activities would be subject to the appropriate level of environmental analysis and public involvement (i.e., site-specific project-level analysis and concurrent evaluation of proposed activities in relation to other relevant federal laws and regulations).

Both the proposed re-designation of Management Areas and the revision of the Desired Future Condition are responsive to the following Forest Plan goals and objectives:

Goal #6. Maintain, or where necessary, restore ecosystem composition, structure, and function within the natural range of variability in all ecosystems, with emphasis on longleaf-pine wiregrass, sand pine-oak scrub, pine flatwoods, hardwood/cypress, oak hammock ecosystems, and other imperiled specialized communities. (Forest Plan p. 2.4)

Goal #9. Manage for habitat conditions to recover and sustain viable populations of all native species, with special emphasis on rare species. (Forest Plan p. 2.4)

Objective #9. Maintain a dynamic system of at least 45,000 to 55,000 acres of habitat capable of supporting scrub-jays Forest-wide on the Ocala NF. The 10-year population objective is 742 to 907 groups. (Forest Plan p. 2.5, also see Amendment #8)

Proposed Actions

1) Re-designate about 50,000 acres of Management Area 8.2 to Management Area 8.4. Current MA 8.4 locations are in Map 1 and the proposed additions to MA 8.4 are in Map 2. Current locations of Management Areas 4.2 & 4.4 are also shown on the maps because several proposed MA 8.4 locations surround or border these MAs, but these areas will not be changed in this proposal. Standards & Guidelines may be added to MAs 4.2 & 4.4 to ensure that MA 8.4-style management can occur where there is scrub habitat within their boundaries.

The proposed MA 8.4 locations were selected based upon a suite of factors including:

- maintaining and promoting habitat connectivity
- distributing high-quality habitat throughout the Forest
- promoting prescribed burning efficiency
- representing the range of all types of scrub habitat
- the habitat requirements of scrub species other than the Florida Scrub-Jay.

Note that internal analysis and public involvement are still ongoing and that the final locations of proposed areas may differ from the locations proposed in the provided maps.

2) Revise the Desired Future Condition (DFC) for Management Area 8.4 as follows:

Current DFC for MA 8.4:

In this area, the vegetation patterns consist of a mosaic of oak scrub patches. Patch sizes are generally governed by the presence of effective burning boundaries, but may be as large as 800 acres. Each patch is burned as needed to ensure that 70% of the patch has oaks 3-6 feet tall and to expose bare sand on the ground. The area looks different from the sand pine scrub in other

management areas, because this area has only a very low density of sand pine overstory. Sand pine is deliberately removed by clearcutting, followed by frequent prescribed burns that kill sand pine seedlings as they try to establish. These conditions remain suitable for Florida Scrub-Jays for the next 15 to 20 years, but they gradually deteriorate as the shrubs fill in and the bare sand becomes covered with litter. At this point, the patch is burned to reset the conditions for the Scrub-Jay and other species. Evidence of plowed fire lines around previous fires is frequently encountered. The landscape is rarely interrupted by narrow road corridors.

Proposed revision for MA 8.4:

In this area, vegetation patterns consist of a mosaic of oak scrub patches. The patches are dominated by scrub habitat with high amounts of scrub oak cover, very low amounts of sand pine cover, and scattered areas of open bare ground (see Photos 1 & 2). The oak layer is less than 9 feet tall over most of the area and scattered areas of older habitat occur rarely across the landscape. Young, short scrub habitat is adjacent to older, taller scrub habitat that is decreasing in habitat quality for Scrub-Jays. Commercial harvests continue to occur within this area as merchantable sand pines are harvested for a final time. Mechanical treatment may occur after harvest as pre-burn fuel preparation technique or as a stand-alone treatment where application of fire is not advisable. Prescribed burning operations can be initiated whenever the habitat conditions begin to degrade. After an initial rotation, burns may become patchier as areas of open, bare ground prevent complete fuel consumption over the entire burn block. Patch sizes are generally governed by the presence of effective burning boundaries. Evidence of plowed fire lines around previous fires is frequently encountered.

The proposed new DFC for MA 8.4 provides a clearer vision of what habitat conditions benefit the Florida Scrub-Jay as well as providing a measure of habitat conditions that trigger initiation of prescribed burning operations as opposed to using a length of time as a trigger point.

Photo 1. Example of high-quality Florida Scrub-Jay habitat. Oak-dominated shrub layer low in height, low sand pine presence, and scattered areas of open, bare ground.



Photo 2. Second example of high-quality Florida Scrub-Jay habitat.

